

Intelligence for the Highest Levels

Serving Our Senior Consumers

Charles A. Peters

It was a pleasant Saturday morning in the summer of 1988, shortly before the Republican convention in New Orleans. As was the custom on weekends, the briefing of Vice President Bush was at his residence on Observatory Hill, and the warm temperature encouraged us to meet over coffee and cinnamon toast on the large porch that runs along two sides of the house(b)(3)(c)

When he had finished the briefing, the Vice President said, "Pete, assuming all goes well at the convention and if I win in November, I want to change President Reagan's practice of receiving *The President's Daily Brief* (PDB) from his National Security Adviser. I want to continue these daily briefings by you and the staff." I was frankly flattered, but I reminded him that the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI), who was by statute his intelligence adviser, might have something to say about the arrangement(b)(3)(c)

"The DCI is welcome to attend whenever he wishes," the Vice President said, "but the PDB session should be handled on a regular basis by the usual working-level group.(b)(3)(c)

Of course, the convention came off without a hitch, and the Vice President won the election convincingly. On 21 January, the day after the inauguration, therefore, we gathered for the first time in the Oval Office. Present, as was the custom in the Bush presidency, were Chief of Staff John Sununu, National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft, and Deputy National Security Adviser Bob Gates. DCI Webster also was there, and that led to the first of a long series of informal bits of banter that were to mark our daily session(b)(3)(c)

When the President had finished reading, he turned to me and said with deadly seriousness, "I'm quite satisfied with the intelligence support, but there is one area in which you'll just have to do better." The DCI visibly stiffened. "The Office of Comic Relief," the new President went on, "will have to step up its output." With an equally straight face I promised the President we would give it our best shot. As we were leaving the Oval Office, I wasted no time in reassuring the Director that this was a lighthearted exchange typical of President Bush, and that the DCI did not have to search out an Office of Comic Relief and authorize a major shake(b)(3)(c)

The New Administration

Four years later, in 1993, we met with the new President, and his team for the first time. Deputy Director for Intelligence John Helgerson, who had played a major role in the PDB service to the President-elect in Little Rock, accompanied and made the introductions. In addition to the President's Chief of Staff "Mack" McClarty, National Security Adviser Tony Lake and his deputy Sandy Berger and Vice President Gore and his National Security Adviser were present in the Oval Office. Perhaps because of the larger group, President Clinton moved from behind his desk to one of the two chairs in front of the fireplace. The Vice President took the other chair and the rest of us arrayed ourselves on the two facing sofas perpendicular to the fireplace(b)(3)(c)

... the following were performed in the inauguration. (b)(3)(c)

Not surprisingly, there was a fair amount of chaos in the West Wing, and the start of the session was delayed. Some people were not certain where their desks were. Few had computers and telephones hooked up and operating. This was understandable for a group new not only to the White House but also, for the most part, to the national government. It was, however, similar to the scheduling problems that Helgerson had experienced in Little Rock, and it foreshadowed an irregularity that was to continue to mark the briefing relationsh(b)(3)(c)

The atmosphere was stiffer than in the Bush administration, although the President seemed warm enough and interested. Our records show that on his first day in office he asked for a "short paper" on human rights abuses in Haiti. A piece in the PDB that day dealt with the (b)(1)chemical weapons program. The President noted that one of the differences between being in Washington and being Governor of Arkansas was that in Little Rock CW refers to country and western music. (b)(3)(c)

Relationships, meanwhile, were still being sorted out. For most of the participants, their only experience with the use of intelligence was that garnered in Little Rock during the preinaugural period, when it was interesting but not vital to see what CIA was saying about the world's trouble spots. Now, there was a responsibility to act on behalf of the United States. How much confidence should they put in the words being placed before them? And how much help could they expect from those word(b)(3)(c)

The other PDB recipients began a pattern of regular briefings that has continued. The day before the inauguration, the Vice President-elect had asked for two papers on aspects of (b)(1) (b)(1) and on inauguration day we saw him twice--once briefly before he was sworn in and then later that evening between inaugural events at the Mayflower Hotel. Secretaries-designate Christopher (State) and Aspin (Defense), who had been receiving briefings when they were in town before the inauguration, continued the practice through their confirmation periods(b)(3)(c)

Importance of Personal Contact

The three vignettes--one on the Vice President's porch and two in the Oval Office--illustrate, I believe, the importance of personal and continuing contact in serving the President and his top advisers effectively. The concept is hardly a new one. Fifteen years ago, Bob Gates wrote, "Above all, we in intelligence should appreciate the primacy of personal relationships in making government work.... Personal contacts...are essential to ensuring that the best possible intelligence product in fact reaches our most important customer in time to make a difference."(1)(b)(3)(c)

Thirteen years before that, Directorate of Intelligence officer (b)(3)(c) wrote, "Communication--free and easy contact in an atmosphere of confidence--is essential to the smooth working of the intelligence-policy relationship. Mechanisms can be established to speed the flow of intelligence up and requirements down, and these mechanisms are essential. But nothing is so valuable as an effective person-to-person relationship."(1)(b)(3)(c)

It was my experience over 14 years of working with senior policymakers that both sides benefit from such a relationship. For those in policy positions, there is an opportunity to ask questions on the spot and to explore areas of interest. Over a period of time, the way is opened for easy dialogue. The written product itself takes on more meaning when it does not just appear unannounced in the in-box. (b)(3)(c)

For the intelligence side, there is an unparalleled opportunity to provide relevant material for important customers. Much guesswork about what is desired is removed, and we learn at first hand a good deal about the level of knowledgability of our principal customers that enables us to avoid either repeating the obvious or dazzling with the obscure. Even if there is no verbalization, it becomes apparent that intelligence has not been helpful when a customer reads the headline and then turns the page(b)(3)(c)

Both sides also benefit from personalizing the product. All the readers, of course, got the same PDB, but the real growth industry of the last decade has been the response to individual interests. There also have been a substantial number of oral briefings by teams of experts--particularly before foreign travel by one of our customers. Quite often, we anticipated a need and offered a collection of papers or other intelligence products that we thought would be of interest in connection with a speech, Congressional testimony, or a foreign visit(b)(3)(c)

Even George Shultz was a more avid consumer than he recalls. In his book, he charged the Agency with using its analytic product to push a policy line and said that he told acting DCI Gates in January 1987--at the height of the Iran-Contra controversy--that he "wouldn't trust anything you guys said about Iran, no matter what." At the same time, he told new National Security Adviser Frank Carlucci that he continued to read the PDB "in part to know what was being put before him.(b)(3)(c)

In fact, the daily record of briefings during Shultz's six-and-a-half years as Secretary of State shows that he seldom missed a session when he was in town, that he welcomed having a member of the PDB staff travel with him on vacations in California, western Massachusetts, and elsewhere, and that he frequently requested the additional Directorate of Intelligence products that are listed weekly. On several occasions, he responded with enthusiasm to analytic reports and urged that they be brought to the attention of his subordinates or other PDB recipients(b)(3)(c)

On 14 January 1989, two years after the Secretary's critical comments to Gates and Carlucci, I had my last meeting with him. I thanked him for the interesting discussions we had had on the role and the shortcomings of intelligence and wished him well in California. My notes from that meeting quote the Secretary as saying that we had provided a "useful service" and describing the PDB as a good publication--"succinct, with excellent graphics." The Secretary went on, according to my notes, by acknowledging that he didn't always agree, but that was to be expected. He said he only wished he had "tasked the intelligence folks more." We were always responsive, he said, and the reports were good. He indicated that he would raise this point with Secretary-designate Baker(b)(3)(c)

The DCI's Role

All Directors know that regular access to the President is a major factor in the success of their tenure at the CIA. It is good for morale at Langley and for their ability to get things done. It strengthens their hand with cabinet-level colleagues, gives them more muscle on the Hill, and enables them to withstand public criticism when, inevitably, it comes(b)(3)(c)

Some Directors have started out with the advantage of knowing the President well and of having served him before. Bill Casey had run President Reagan's election campaign, and Bob Gates was well known to President Bush because of his service as Deputy National Security Adviser. Others knew much less about their new boss(b)(3)(c)

After he was nominated for the DCI job but before he was confirmed by the Senate, we added Jim Woolsey to our regular briefees. Until he was officially on the job, propriety required that we meet with him in his law office in downtown Washington. On substantive issues, the sessions were much like those with other members of the incoming administration. Woolsey, however, was at least equally interested in the daily reports from the Helgerson team in Little Rock and what they said about the President-elect's interests and approach. He had had, Woolsey told me one day, only a single, brief meeting with Mr. Clinton in Little Rock after the election and little significant association with him before November(b)(3)(c)

The ground rules at the Clinton White House were similar to those of the Bush administration: the DCI was more than welcome to attend whenever he chose, but the PDB Staff would deliver the book. In practice, Woolsey adopted the pattern set by his two predecessors and sought to go to the Oval Office once or twice a week. When he managed to connect with the Presidential session, things went well. The President was always gracious, and the two men appeared to have respect for each other. The problem was that the President's schedule was frequently in flux. He often fell behind, and the briefing would be delayed, shortened, or abandoned altogether. Frequently, the President's scheduler would warn us that Mr. Clinton was running behind and beg us to "keep it short." If Tony Lake or Sandy Berger had important policy matters to discuss, the problem was compounded, and we would give up our time. It was not difficult for us to wait and then often to be disappointed, but it was different for the DCI, who usually had other appointments and could not postpone them when there was no assurance we would see the President(b)(3)(c)

Coping With Crises

While there were many foreign crises for US policymakers during my years on the PDB, none focused the attention of senior officials more sharply and over a period of several months than the response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. All of the elements were present: major US forces were directly engaged in a shooting war, and a disparate alliance had to be held together. There were many questions about military capabilities and the effectiveness of weapon systems--some of which were being used for the first time in combat. At least until US forces were engaged, public attitudes were ambiguous and, with live television a fact of life, putting a spin on developments became a considerable undertaking for policymaker(b)(3)(c)

The Intelligence Community responded by going into a task force mode and publishing spot commentaries several times a day to keep up with breaking news. (b)(1) reporting related to Iraq was given highest priority. Policymakers, of course, a(b)(3)(n)cess to extensive media coverage and to reporting from US commands that were directly involved. Telephone calls to foreign leaders became more frequent, and senior Defense Department officials regularly briefed the President on operational developments. On one occasion, Secretary Cheney went into the Oval Office with us to tell the President the latest from the battlefield(b)(3)(c)

PDB briefing session, Clockwise: President Bush, Charles Peters, DCI Webster, Chief of Staff Sununu, Deputy National Security Advisor Gates, and National Security Adviser Scowcroft

The appetite for information, including tactical details not ordinarily covered in the PDB, grew in proportion to the directness of US involvement. The daily reports on the briefings in January and February 1991 reflect (b)(1) as we strove to bring something useful to the policymakers. In the pi(b)(3)(n) got into some pretty fine detail. Questions were raised in the Oval Office, (b)(1) (b)(3)(n)

| | | |
|-----------|-------------------------------------|-----------|
| (b)(1) | | |
| (b)(3)(n) | President Bush became very familiar | (b)(1) |
| | | (b)(3)(n) |

(b)(3)(c)

Some of our best work was done on issues that might be regarded as peripheral to the daily accounts from the battlefield. There was great interest in the progress of an oil slick from an offshore Iraqi pumping station as it made its way down the Gulf toward Saudi desalinization plant intakes.

(b)(1)

(b)(3)(n)

Even more important and

more difficult to address with confidence was the question of

(b)(1)

(b)(3)(c)

(b)(3)(n)

Our records show that a paper on the military structure of Iraq was

(b)(1) A more theoretical study of

drew

rave reviews at the Pentagon

(b)(3)(c)

There were issues that were clearly controversial--some of short duration and some of longer. Early in January,

(b)(1)

(b)(3)(n)

Colin Powell, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, (b)(1)
(b)(3)(c) never believed the story. For a week or so after the event, he ribbed us good naturedly about the missing helicopter

More significant was the issue of whether Iraq had chemical warheads for its Scud missiles. With these missiles being fired against Allied installations in Saudi Arabia and against population centers in Israel, this was a high-stakes question. The Intelligence Community knew of Iraq's extensive CW program and credited it with the capability to develop a CW warhead for the Scud. Baghdad had demonstrated frequently a willingness to use chemicals delivered by aircraft or artillery shells in its war with Iran and against its own people. General Powell and others in the military were skeptical, and, in the end, no Scuds with CW warheads were fired. Were the Iraqis deterred by openly stated threats of massive retaliation if chemical weapons were used? Or had they simply failed to build an operational CW warhead for the Scud

(b)(3)(c)

That question was never finally resolved. By raising the issue, however, Allied forces could take precautions, and the warnings of retaliation could have left little doubt in Iraqi minds that US and Israeli responses would make the use of CW warheads a bad idea. The cost in terms of wearing gas masks and protective clothing and evacuating threatened civilian areas seems small in comparison.

(b)(3)(c)

Even at the height of the fighting, when Secretary Cheney and General Powell were spending all or part of the night in their offices, our records show a surprising attention to other events going on in the world. This was also period when there were serious problems in relations between the Soviet Government and the Baltic states, and there was much interest in the military threat to Lithuania. There also were political changes in Moscow, and the issue of NATO security guarantees for the East European countries was prominent. Secretary Cheney continued to be a regular customer for the wide

variety of intelligence publications listed in the PDB every Saturday (b)(3)(c)

On Bringing Bad News

On 19 February 1982, I was scheduled to meet with Secretary of State Haig at his home in northwest Washington. As I went to the front door early that morning, I saw *The Washington Post* on his steps, and I picked it up to bring it in to him. I had read the *Post* on the way over to his house, and I knew that it featured a lengthy front-page story by Bob Woodward on the "unvarnished Haig" that quoted extensively from notes taken by a person "present at nearly two dozen regular senior staff meetings over the last year." The quotes covered a wide range of foreign policy issues and included often candid comments by the Secretary on many of his colleagues in Washington and on his opposite numbers in other government (b)(3)(c)

Haig had complained frequently and bitterly about leaks damaging to US policy and to him personally. Most complaints were directed at the White House, where he later complained that senior staffers were concerned that his aggressive approach to policymaking diminished the role of the President and perhaps even foreshadowed Haig's own presidential ambitions. This latest *Post* article, however, appeared to involve an internal leak at State, and I admit I was more than a little curious to see the famous Haig temper in action (b)(3)(c)

When the Secretary let me in, I handed him the *Post* and told him he probably would want to read it first. He glanced through the story and jumped for the telephone, finally tracking down his public affairs officer at home. Haig was furious--and rightfully so--and I made no effort to record his language (b)(3)(c)

I mention this story for two reasons. There do appear to be times when we in the intelligence business go out of our way to bring our own bad news to policymakers. There is a sadistic element, I fear, in all of us. Second, it provides an opportunity to get into an important subject: how can we strike the proper balance between candor and pandering in our intelligence writing, or at least come to a better understanding of the senior policymaker's view of where that balance should be struck?

(b)(1)
(b)(3)(n)

(b)(1)
(b)(3)(n)

There are, I believe, two bad-news issues at work. One can be disposed of easily. We do write about a lot of drcary topics--coups, wars and rebellions, terrorist threats, failing economies, and foreigners out to do in the United States. Good-news pieces are rare and almost always are remarked on. Both as Vice President and as President, Bush often took it upon himself to try to lighten the atmosphere, and he regularly called on the "Office of Comic Relief" to increase its output. We tried--more often than I care to remember--to get some humorous items into the book, but satisfying several levels of bureaucracy that a story is funny, in good taste, and not demeaning to the overall product is no easy tas(b)(3)(c)

As a result, much of our effort at easing the atmosphere was never part of the official written record. I took a hot fudge sundae into the Oval Office one morning to pay an election bet with Governor Sununu. Another day, the governor called back the White House photographer to get a shot of Scowcroft, Gates, Sununu, and me shaking our fingers at an empty chair behind the presidential desk. Sununu later had the four of us sign the picture, which was intended as a takeoff on G.B. Trudeau's cartoon about the President's evil and invisible twin. The inscription read, "To President Skippy, from the gang who sees through you." The President later took the autographed picture to the White House press room, where he told reporters that he did not mind the levity; it just should have been signed "from the gang who used to work here.(b)(3)(c)

The real bad-news issue, however, is telling a policymaker that his policy is not working and describing all the reasons why it will not. Intelligence writing tends to focus on the trouble ahead. We seldom have a vested interest in the success of a particular policy--at least not to the extent that the architect of the policy is anxious to see it succeed. We tend to see what has gone wrong over the years or the decades, and we have learned--often painfully--that if we predict disaster and it does not happen, there is seldom a penalty. If, on the other hand, we fail to warn of disaster and it happens, there are all kinds of career and personal penalties.(b)(3)(c)

It is well documented that policymakers--especially senior ones--have a different view. They are used to seeing their policies succeed, and they have major political and often personal stakes in the policies doing well(b)(3)(c)

I have no new answers on how to bridge this gap, except to recognize that it exists and to remind ourselves constantly that gratuitous fingers in the eye of the policymakers do little good and risk turning off the recipient of the bad news to the whole intelligence produ(b)(3)(c)

It also is well to keep in mind that policymakers have interests that go beyond our "objective," sometimes ivory-tower view of a situation. Politics and relations with Congress are almost always a factor for the President and his principal aides. We may feel that Gorbachev's approach to reform will not work and that he may not last, but a President has little choice but to deal with the man in power, and he may be especially inclined to do so if he knows him personally. For a President to speculate publicly about another leader's weakness or to act in a way that suggests he is a diminished actor on

the world scene will, in many cases, become a self-fulfilling prophecy(b)(3)(c)

We may say over and over again that there can be no settlement in Bosnia that does not recognize Serb gains on the battlefield. For both foreign and domestic policy reasons, however, no President can appear to be accepting ethnic cleansing(b)(3)(c)

Bad news can cause real problems for policymakers. One of the most dramatic examples was the conflicting estimates of bomb damage to Iraqi armor in the weeks immediately preceding the ground offensive into Kuwait and Iraq in 1991. I have no intention of going back over the conflicting assessments, the reasons for them, or who was right. One week before the ground attack, however, then Deputy National Security Adviser Bob Gates told me in no uncertain terms--a message I am sure he wanted me to carry back to Langley--that the President needed a "solid statement" from the Intelligence Community on which to base policy. Present efforts, he said, do not "fix" the problem or even "ameliorate" it. In addition, he noted that the low damage estimates coming out of the Community compared with the higher figures from CINCENT would be used on the Hill to argue for a delay in the ground attack. General Scowcroft, who was present throughout Gates's comments, said he agreed with Gates but would refrain from "piling on." My notes show that the issue also came up in the Oval Office, with the President, himself a former fighter pilot, raising the possibility of "pilot euphoria" to explain the higher field estimate(b)(3)(c)

Gates's remarks make two important points. First, this was an important issue on which the President needed a firm judgment from the Intelligence Community. Other factors would play a part in determining when the ground attack would be launched--the readiness of Allied forces, the ability to sustain that readiness if more time were needed to destroy Iraqi armor, the chance that Iraq would anticipate the timing and directions of the Allied attack if the delay was prolonged--but intelligence on Iraqi capabilities was important. Discussions of methodologies for assessing bomb damage to explain differing conclusions were not what the President and his advisers needed(b)(3)(c)

Further, there was the issue of how the intelligence would be used by those who opposed the ground attack. If the information went only to senior policymakers, it could be considered and acted upon or discounted. The prospect of it leaking or being used by opponents of the ground attack on the Hill, however, was real and definitely a factor in White House unhappiness(b)(3)(c)

This case illustrates two quite different views of the Intelligence Community's role. We saw ourselves as purveyors of the truth and tended to disregard the impact of our views on the execution of policy. The White House, however, needed to bring the Congress and the country along in support of a controversial policy. Senior officials looked to intelligence not just to be a team player but to provide information useful in the context in which they were operating(b)(3)(c)

The last phrase is crucial. Our mission is not only to collect, analyze, and present intelligence we find important. We also have to understand better the needs of the policymakers and, without sacrificing objectivity, do what we can to meet those needs(b)(3)(c)

NOTES

(1) *Studies in Intelligence*, winter 1980, p. 26.

(2) *Studies in Intelligence*, winter 1967, p. 6.